

Ballad: Story in Song

A Class given by Lady Melanie de la Tour

Key Terms

Ballad:

from Lat. *ballare*, ‘to dance’

“Although the origin of the term ‘ballad’ is in medieval dance-song, the word had lost this connotation by the late Middle Ages. By the 14th century it referred to a strophic solo song with a narrative text. Ballads are ubiquitous in Europe, particularly in the British Isles, Denmark, Spain, and east European countries. They are primarily products of oral tradition, but from the 16th century onwards they were also published in ‘broadsides’ (broadsheets). A ballad is not to be confused with a **BALLADE**.

“In the typical ‘common’ or ‘ballad’ metre a stanza has four lines, though many other structures are also found. The melodies have been more recently recorded than the texts, but there is evidence that some tune types are of considerable antiquity. In England, the Ionian (major) mode is the most popular for ballad tunes; however, others are commonly found: the Mixolydian (G), the Dorian (D), and the Aeolian (A).” (Wilton, Peter. "Ballad." *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Ed. Alison Latham. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 29 Jul. 2017.)

Ballad Meter:

“In Eng. poetry, ballad meter—or, as it is sometimes termed, ballad stanza—refers to the meter of the traditional ballad, a popular narrative song form since the late Middle Ages, and the written literary adaptation of this oral form.... Commonly, ballad meter designates quatrains that alternate iambic tetrameter with iambic trimeter and rhyme at the second and fourth lines.” (Dugaw, D. "Ballad Meter, Hymn Meter." In *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Roland Green, Stephen Cushman, and Clare Cavanagh. 4th ed. Princeton University Press, 2012.)

Ballade:

“The most important of the Old French *forms fixes* (fixed forms) and the dominant verse form of Old French poetry in the 14th and 15th cs. (*Formes fixes* are usually three in number: the *ballade*, the *rondeau*, and the *virelai*.) The most common type of ballade comprises 28 lines of octosyllables, i.e., three eight-line stanzas rhyming ababbcbC and a four-line envoi rhyming bcbC. As the capital letter indicates, the last line of the first stanza serves as the refrain, repeated as the last line of each stanza and the envoi. In the complexity of its rhyme scheme, restriction of its rhyme sounds, and use of the refrain, the ballade is perhaps the most exacting of the fixed forms.

“The ballade of the vintage French period was imitated in England by Chaucer and John Gower, though now in decasyllables. Chaucer uses it for several of his early complaints and takes the single octave from it for the monk's tale stanza.” (Preminger, A., et al. "Ballade." *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Roland Green, et al., Princeton University Press, 4th edition, 2012.)

Select Bibliography for Further Research

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